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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV (Jess), DRL

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF SOCI PGOV PREL VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: POLICE DISRUPT TRAVEL OF UBCV LEADERS TO HCMC

REF: HCMC 942

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Police apparently stopped United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) leaders Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy from leaving Binh Dinh Province to drive to Ho Chi Minh City on October 8 (local time). Although various reports differed on details, there was general agreement that a crowd of 40-60 police and others surrounded the monks in their van shortly after they left the pagoda where Thich Huyen Quang resides. The incident occurred in the context of reports of increased tension following a meeting of leaders of the banned UBCV (Reftel). Charge raised the issue with the MFA in Hanoi and stressed the importance of immediately allowing the monks to continue their travel unimpeded. ConGen also contacted the HCMC External Relations Office and later reached the Chairman of Binh Dinh Province. The Chairman said when he learned of the situation he had said to just let them go. He said the monks had already been allowed to leave, and as of 5:00 p.m. local time, ConGen was able to confirm with Thich Tue Sy that the monks had been allowed to depart around 4:00 p.m. Thich Tue Sy said everybody -- including "the elders" -- were "fine." End summary.

2. (SBU) According to a press release from the Paris-based International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB), UBCV leaders Thich Huyen Quang, Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy were prevented from leaving Binh Dinh Province to drive to Ho Chi Minh City on October 8 local time. Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy had traveled to Binh Dinh to attend a UBCV meeting September 18-20, where UBCV leaders discussed personnel issues and strategies for seeking government recognition for their banned religious organization. Local UBCV contacts confirmed to ConGen that the three religious leaders were among a group of UBCV monks that left Nguyen Thieu Pagoda together in a van early in the morning on October 8. Shortly after leaving the pagoda, where Thich Huyen Quang currently resides, the van was surrounded by a large group of police, reported as 40 by one source and 60 by another. (Post Note: We have no way of verifying these numbers.)

3. (SBU) At about 3:30 pm, ConGen reached the Chairman of the Binh Dinh People's Committee on his mobile phone. The Chairman blamed Thich Huyen Quang's own followers for the situation, saying they wanted him to stay in Binh Dinh to translate Buddhist books and train more nuns and monks --assistance he had offered at the opening ceremony of his home pagoda's Basic Buddhism School. The Chairman claimed the followers were only trying to prevent Thich Huyen Quang from leaving, not the other two monks. The Chairman said when he learned of the incident, he stated that "if he (Thich Huyen Quang) wants to go, just let him go" and that the monks had already been allowed to continue their journey to HCMC. At 5:00 pm, ConGen confirmed directly with the monks that they had been allowed to leave around 4:00 pm. (Note: The Chairman's claim that the van had been delayed by UBCV followers contradicts press reports and IBIB press releases describing a large crowd of police and others throwing stones and puncturing the tires of the monks' van. The details of what happened in Binh Dinh are not yet fully clear and these reports are still unconfirmed. In the past, Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang have recounted stories of large adoring crowds surrounding them, but the Chairman's interpretation seems to take this one step too far. End note.)

4. (SBU) UBCV contacts reported that police had originally told Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy their "registration" for visiting Binh Dinh had expired and they should return to HCMC. Thich Huyen Quang decided to travel with them in order to consult a doctor. A UBCV contact in Hue told us separately that the situation has been very tense since UBCV religious leaders returned from the September 18-20 UBCV meeting at the Nguyen Thieu Pagoda. One contact indicated that even as he and ConGenoff were speaking, there were two policemen at his pagoda waiting for him to accompany them for more "educatio." oks who had attended the meeting and later returned to six different pagodas in Hue had been called in by the police for "education" for the past several days, and their pagodas were being closely watched. (Post Note: We have come across this practice in other situations. Even our local Foreign Ministry counterparts who have traveled or studied overseas can be required to attend re-conditioning classes for up to a year.)

5. (SBU) ConGen had contacted Deputy Director of the External Relations Office, Mr. Le Hung Quoc, early in the afternoon. He said he had not heard anything about the situation, but would inform the ConGen if he were able to get any additional

information. While he had no specific knowledge about why the police would prevent the monks from going to HCMC, Mr. Quoc noted that the UBCV was a banned organization and their September meeting had been illegal. ConGen stressed the importance of providing accurate information and resolving the issue quickly, as there could be no justification for holding UBCV leaders for attending a peaceful meeting.

16. (SBU) Separately on October 8, the Charge in Hanoi raised the issue with Acting Director of the Americas Department Mr. Nguyen Van Que. The Charge drew Mr. Que's attention to Thich Huyen Quang's meeting with the Prime Minister and the right of the UBCV monks to travel freely. He pointed out that an incident like this, if true, would inevitably further damage the GVN's reputation on human rights and religious freedoms, was an unwelcome development at any time - but particularly now when senior GVN leaders were in the U.S. - and could harm the bilateral relationship. He also urged Mr. Que to investigate this information quickly and, if true, immediately allow the monks to continue their travel unimpeded. He asked Mr. Que to let him know the results of the investigation as soon as possible. Mr. Que thanked the Charge for the information (which he had not heard) and said he would look into it.

17. (SBU) Around 5:00 pm, Thich Tue Sy contacted the ConGen and confirmed that the monks had been allowed to depart about an hour earlier. Thich Tue Sy said everybody -- including "the elders" -- were "fine." The Mission made representations at several different levels of government. It is not clear who made the decisions either to stop the monks or eventually allow them to proceed. It was evident in the phone call with the Chairman of Binh Dinh that he quickly made the connection between public image, international reputation and letting the monks go on their way.

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